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ENGLISH IN THE NORMAL SCHOOL¹

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One of the greatest gains teachers of English have made in the past five years is the recognition of the fact that there is a difference between aims and methods of English teaching in, say, the high school on the one hand and the university on the other. It will be well for the teachers in normal schools to inquire whether or not their problems may be to a degree special and unique.

Indeed, from the very nature of a normal school we see that such a school has an English problem of its own. The first truth for a teacher of English in a normal school to accept as, in a measure, fixing his point of view, is that his vision must not be bounded by the walls of his classroom or by the library of his institution; he must even look farther than to the immediate needs of the particular students under his instruction; his thought must go out to the children who will soon be students of his students; his sympathies and his knowledge must reach out to the schoolrooms in which these young people who are now his students will soon be teachers. This is the thing that makes teaching in a normal school unique. The other differences I shall mention branch out from and depend upon this.

What, then, are these other differences? The most obvious one arises from the fact that young people are very imitative, and therefore a normal-school teacher must be very careful as to his methods. He may preach about methods all he wishes, but if he is a strong teacher, enjoying a wholesome measure of the regard and admiration—not to say worship—of his students, they will go out and teach, not necessarily as he told them to teach, but as he taught. That consideration ought to give pause to a good many members of normal faculties. You teachers pride yourselves, do

¹ An address given before the National Council of Teachers of English in St. Paul, Minnesota, July 9, 1914.

you not, on the fact that your students like you? Very well, then; are you willing to have them teach as you do? "Oh," you say, "that isn't fair. Our students are young men and women, while their students will, for the most part, be children. You can't expect the methods to be the same." Granting the partial truth of your inference, let me press this question: Are you willing to have your students teach *anywhere near* the way you do? Are you willing to have them follow your example in making assignments? in honestly holding to those assignments? in handling written work? in showing patience with those who find the work difficult? Are you willing to have them talk anywhere near as much as you do? Or talk *as* you do? Are you careful about your speech habits? To be specific, are you, gentle reader, the normal-school teacher who said this in my hearing: "Somebody told me yesterday that their book didn't contain any footnotes. I wish they would come and get one of these." (The alchemy by which some teachers of English change "a student" or "the child" or "somebody" or "someone" to *they* and *their* is one of the wonders of modern pedagogy.) Do you take two or three minutes every day to call the roll, instead of using some simple device that will do the work better in half a minute? Do you take half a recitation to dictate an outline or an assignment, when the work might have been run off on a duplicator, or, in lieu of that, might have been placed on the board? In short, do you exercise sense and care and economy in those thousand little and big things that go to make up a teacher's relationship with students and with schools and communities? Do you remember that your students will teach very much as you do, if you are a teacher of personality and power?

The second point demanding special consideration in normal work is that the subject-matter ought to be suited somewhat to the needs of the schools in which the normal students are soon to teach. In Wisconsin we are making a conscious endeavor to train specifically for three different groups of work. Our students will, this fall, be asked to shape their courses specifically toward one of three general grades: namely, high-school or grammar grade, or primary work. In every English class in our normal schools, so far as possible, the teachers and students will know

what work they are preparing for, and they will be expected to make their plans accordingly. This policy, which comes mainly as a suggestion of Mr. Kittle, the secretary of our Normal Regents, has received the indorsement of that body, and it is the intention of principals and faculties to give the plan a thorough and honest trial. It may need modification at certain points, but it certainly ought to mean an end of the meaningless and pointless work that is occasionally found in some normal-school classes, where neither students nor teacher are giving any thought to the schools over which the normal students are about to preside as teachers.

Third, normal-school teachers ought certainly to keep in touch with all modern tendencies in teaching English. What are the most important of these tendencies? The most talked of, if not the most important, is the increased attention to oral English. No normal school has a right to consider itself modern if it does not give regular and, so far as possible, adequate instruction in oral composition. This is so obviously true that it ought not to need substantiation. What one factor has more to do with a teacher's success or failure than his power to stand before his school, his class, his school board, or his friends and say what he means correctly, clearly, and effectively? Those of us who have watched schools and teachers could name many teachers who have failed for lack of this power; we could name scores of them who will never progress in their profession because of this lack; and we could name others whose usefulness and helpfulness are increased a hundred fold by the power to say what they think so that others can understand and will believe them.

The second tendency, though not so obvious, is probably first in importance: It is the conception of school work in English as a definite progress through clearly defined stages of development. We may call it a system of *definite minimum requirements*. The idea is, as you know, to set up certain criteria of measurement for the progress of the student through the first eight, or possibly the first twelve, grades. We have proceeded heretofore (at any rate too generally) on the theory that a student's written work ought to be *perfect* from the beginning. We have found it hard to let a single error go unchallenged. We have very naturally feared that

if we did let errors go without correction the wrong habit would grow. And this fear was perfectly reasonable.

But as a result of this "blanket" policy of correction we have been teaching much the same things in the third grade that we teach in the eighth or twelfth; and the pity of it is that too often the students have been actually *getting* these truths nowhere.

We are thus brought face to face with the fact that this plan has failed. At the present time there is no one thing that you can be perfectly sure an eighth-grade student knows in grammar. You may be sure he knows several useful and desirable things; but you can't be sure that he knows, for instance, what determines the person, case, and number of a pronoun. (By the same token, neither does a teacher, if he says "A student . . . they . . . their books.") And school administrators and business men, as well as teachers, are tiring of this situation. They are saying to us: "You must establish some system of minimum requirements. You must manage so that when students have passed the third grade they will know certain things. Those things needn't be hard nor many. And they needn't be all that the boys and girls know. But they must be *known*. There must be a set of attainments upon which students, if they are to pass, must have not merely 70 per cent or 80 per cent, but 100 per cent efficiency. These requirements must be reasonable, and they must be definitely understood by principal, teacher, and pupil. Then they must be lived up to." If we can once get such a system into our schools high-school teachers will not have to wear out their eyes and their hearts teaching twelfth-grade boys to put apostrophes in possessive nouns or periods at the ends of declarative sentences. English work will assume a dignity it does not now have when more definite progress is insisted upon, grade by grade, in the case of every pupil.

A third group of tendencies may be placed under the general head: Emphasis of the Practical. This shows itself in the demand that teachers of other subjects interest themselves in English. Nowhere is this more imperative than in a normal school. It shows itself in the vitalization of the work by having the students write real letters to real people, the letters being actually sent. It

ought to show itself still more in the regular instruction in such letters as a teacher is bound to need to write: letters of application or inquiry; communications addressed to school boards with reference to equipment, discipline, courses of study, or new or additional texts; letters of invitation to lecturers or entertainers, or to judges in school contests, with directions for reaching the school. This practical drift also shows itself in the endeavor to uproot errors of speech that become epidemic in certain localities. In short, it is the attitude which inspires teachers to make their work count in the everyday life of their students and their school. It inspires students to think of their English work, not as an exercise, but as a real thing, that is to be dealt with seriously, and done the best way they know how to do it. Particularly, it will inspire normal students to take more of a teacher's attitude toward their work. They will come to feel, as they should, that the most unforgivable mistakes are those that they know better than to make. The normal-school teacher and student surely need a generous measure of this spirit.

As we said at the beginning, however, a teacher can have adequate appreciation of these three features of normal-school work—sound methods, direction of the work toward a specific end, and sane comprehension of modern tendencies in English teaching; particularly emphasis on oral English, definite minimum requirements, and the practical and vital side of English—only when he has the vision to look beyond his immediate students to the schools in which they are soon to be the teachers.